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RELIGIOUS INTERREGNUM

by Arnold Bennett

AFFIRMATIONS

God in the Modern World

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The Religious Interregnum

by Arnold Bennett, 1867-

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THE RELIGIOUS INTERREGNUM

I

THE UGLY BUILDING

IN an ordinary central London street, well supplied with the thrilling posters of Sunday newspapers, you see in large black letters on a public building the words "God's Message" announced as the subject of a discourse to be delivered that morning (God willing) by the Reverend S. Septimus Blank, who in the evening will deliver another discourse on "The Spiritual Life." Also the announcement that you are heartily welcome. The building, fifty or sixty years old, is very ugly, without any architectural distinction of any kind. From inside comes the sound of a wavering, melancholy chant, sung more or less in unison. The commonplace tune is repeated again and again. Audaciously, self-consciously, you enter.

The interior of the building is as ugly as the exterior. Many years ago you were accustomed twice weekly to enter just such interiors. Apparently nothing has changed in the meantime, except that this one, with a seating capacity of perhaps six hundred, is at most a quarter full. In addition to being ugly, the interior is shabby; and the assemblage too is shabby, though fairly neat. Faces of narrow and anxious minds, many of them proud, even arrogant, in the assurance that they alone are the salt of the earth! Your gaze wanders around in search of something beautiful and sympathetic on which it may rest, and discovers naught save the fresh visage of a nice-looking young girl, or an occasional older countenance radiating kindness and tolerance.

As your ears catch the ill-pronounced words of the chant

you gradually learn that the assemblage is addressing in song a God, its own God, the one God, asking its God to do certain acts for the advantage of the assemblage, and expressing towards its God feelings in which confidence and terror are mingled.

The assemblage sits, rustling and coughing. Presently the Reverend S. Septimus Blank, dressed like a shopwalker but for his white tie, rises from his lofty seat and begins by admitting with an air of modest candour that he is not in the confidence of God, whose counsels are hidden from him. In a few minutes you perceive that this modesty is feigned. The man *is* in the confidence of God. God is invisible, everlasting, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent (being especially there in the building). God made the revolving earth and the sun and moon and the innumerable stars and the seasons and heat and cold. God created every human being, and in His own image. And the man in the white tie knows, if not all, a very great deal about the aims and the intentions of God. Beyond doubt he is secretly aware of God's secret counsels. He knows exactly what will please and what will displease God. He can foretell the furthest consequences of acts. The grave has no mystery for him, death no sting. He has solved the eternal enigma. And there is no doubt about it all.

If anybody should presume to question, the man refers them to the book on the desk under his hands. The book is the sole depository of divine wisdom. Everything is in the book. He does not explain the process of reasoning by which he has come to be so utterly sure that the book is what he states it to be. He merely states it to be that. From the book he permits no appeal. To appeal against the book is absurd as well as vilely wicked. To mention the achievements in knowledge of that organised common sense known as "science" is to arouse hostility if not disdain. The authority on the ways of God has never applied himself to science; he is beyond science, smiles on it from on high.

And the authority on God is trusted by his flock with a trust which proves its genuineness in the only manner satisfactory to the general world. The trust costs both money and time. The building is of bricks, wood, and stone. True, it was erected by the grandfathers of the generation now using it; but probably it is mortgaged, and the interest thereon has to be paid, together with other outgoings. Moreover, the place must be maintained in repair and kept clean. And the authority on God must be lodged, fed, and clothed. Also the organisation needs continual watchfulness: which means the giving up of leisure to committee work and a considerable amount of financial and other responsibility.

The individuals forming the organisation are mainly small tradesmen and small employers of all sorts. None of them is rich in the Mayfair or City sense. None of them would make the sacrifices which in fact are made, from mere fancifulness or from any motive except that engendered by real conviction. And the sacrificial motive is strong enough not to be discouraged by the thought of the greater past when the building was filled weekly by enthusiasts, when the cult of God was popular, when authorities on God were plenteous and masterful instead of being, as now they are, hard to find and apologetic to the general world.

Nor does snobbishness come into the equation. Nor can the cult be regarded as the help to trade which it once undoubtedly was. Nor is the desire for office sufficient to account for the sacrifices; offices, far more influential and carrying far more prestige than those connected with the organisation, go a-begging in the vast parish or borough in which the organisation struggles to keep its fame from one year to the next.

The motive may be selfish—the ensuring of the future felicity of the individual—but at least it shows vision. And is the motive wholly selfish? If it were, why should the organisation contribute to the expense of sending forth

legates to the ends of the earth for the purpose of persuading distant peoples, held to be barbaric, that their gods are false gods, that to follow them is damnation, and that the one true God is the God present in the ugly building of bricks and wood and stone flanked north and south on Sundays by the thrilling posters of Sunday newspapers. Here, obviously, is altruism. The sublime phenomenon of faith cannot be explained away by any attempt to fix its origin in the baseness of human nature. It is transcendental, and the more pathetic it seems to the sardonic, the more transcendental it must be admitted to be.

When, detached if not cynical, you emerge into the street you feel, even you, and in spite of yourself, that you have come from somewhere else, and that everything exterior to the ugly building is rather more ordinary, more prosaic than you had previously supposed it to be. You see the dispersing, shabby, possibly stupid little crowd with new eyes. You have not been striving to get into communion with an invisible and terrific power; but they have. A few have failed entirely. None has had complete success, but many have had some success. You yourself, again in spite of yourself, have been perhaps drawn into the communion. You may smile at the ingenuousness of the little crowd; you may repudiate the crowd, your intellectual inferiors, who have not the least idea what is going on in your refined and subtle head.

Yet have not you, emerging from some magnificent cathedral, had now and then an experience somewhat like that of the crowd? You reply that your feeling then was an æsthetic feeling excited by the architectural beauty of the cathedral, or a reaction to the historic sense and occasioned by the thought of the centuries of event which the cathedral had survived. I question both theories. For this reason, that there are magnificent edifices, edifices full of history, the spectacle of which does not and could not melt you into the cathedral mood. The influence of the cathedral is the influence of the mean building in the London street

and it disengages itself from an imagined contact with the aura of an invisible and terrific power.

The thoughts of the little crowd swing back to meal-tables, counters, desks, benches, factories, conceivably with the relief of having descended in safety from a perilous height, of having re-entered the snugness of home after being exposed to the winds that blow between the worlds. But with the relief is refreshment—refreshment resulting from the satisfaction of an inexplicable and deep desire. The refreshment is renascence. The intellectual and the imaginative processes of the little crowd are crude, ridiculous, open to the severest criticism. Admitted. But think not that the little crowd does not criticise its faith. There must certainly be hours when its faith strikes it as worthless. Even the white-tied authority on God is beset at times with a frightful fear that his pretensions are preposterous. These misgivings, however, pass. Returning faith rolls over them. And the ugly building with all that it stands for remains : a resource, a retreat, the doorway to the uncomprehended infinite towards which mankind is driven by an instinct once supposed to be irresistible.

II

GODLESSNESS

THE religious instinct, the instinct towards the worship and the fear of an all-causing personal God, was for an immense period nearly universal. If it did not actuate a man during his healthy life, it usually revealed its presence in him, asserted its power, when he came to the point of death.

But there were exceptions. To speak of what I know best, I will mention that I myself never felt within me the operation of a religious instinct. Even as a schoolboy, in the late seventies of the last century, brought up as I was in a society which honestly deemed itself to be in continuous and close communion with God, I never felt anything but

a cautious disdain for the impassioned beliefs surrounding me. Nor was I then conscious of any fundamental lack in my nature. Nor was I in the least degree aware of the great undermining controversies then so violently proceeding in the intellectual world above me. (Had I been aware of them I should certainly have taken the unfashionable side.) I was interested in the manifestations of religion only to avoid and ignore them. And I was justified in assuming that I was not alone among persons of my age in this attitude.

Since then the unfashionable side has, with astounding rapidity, become the fashionable. I never hear discussions about religious faith now. Nobody, in my acquaintance, openly expresses the least concern about it. Churches are getting emptier and emptier, unless they can attract a crowd by inducements which have no real connection with faith, such as brilliant music, emotional oratory, or picturesque ceremonial. Ministers of religion themselves, even high prelates, do not hesitate to deny dogma which half a century ago was regarded as sacrosanct. And those who obstinately stand by the ancient body of doctrine in its entirety are at the best treated to a polite smile, at the worst scourged with contumelious derision.

So much for the demeanour of my acquaintance (which is wide and comprehensive) in particular, and, I am convinced, of the intelligentsia in general, towards the historic Christian faith, Oriental in origin and Jewish in inception, whose power over Western people has never been approached by any other religious faith, in either prestige, or moral force, or sweep of sovereignty.

The empire of Christianity is crumbling because it has been attacked at its weakest point—its sole weak point: the once universally accepted convention that the theory of the direct divine inspiration of the Bible must not be questioned. There was absolutely no external evidence in favour of this theory. That the convention was obeyed so loyally and for so many centuries is the best proof of the

existence in mankind of a deep instinct towards communion with God and the consequent yearning for a clear faith upon which to base the communion. That the convention was at last broken through is the best proof of the ultimate ascendancy of the reasoning faculty in mankind. From the moment when geologists demonstrated that the earth could not have been made in six days or six years or six thousand years—from that moment the convention was doomed. It had to be. Nothing could maintain it. The breaches in it inevitably multiplied faster and faster, until the thing lay in ruins.

The Roman Catholic Church, which consistently discouraged the study of the Bible among the masses, which merely and totally forbade all argument against doctrinal authority, and which at the same time offered simple and sedative dogma to the simple, has survived more successfully than any other Church. But even the Roman Catholic Church, with all its wise and sympathetic understanding of the limitations of human nature, cannot survive indefinitely. In the end it will not escape the general disaster of Christian religions.

A Church cannot flourish for ever on the adherence of the masses only. The masses will be content as long as they are assured that the leaders of thought are content. But not much longer. As soon as they realise that the leaders of thought are not with them they will get restive and in the result will refuse control.

The Churches have issued an ultimatum to thinkers: "Believe or perish." The thinkers have accepted the challenge, answering: "We cannot believe, and we will not perish." And so far as anybody knows they have not perished and are not perishing. Quite the contrary. The Churches can take no further measure. Their last shot is fired. Where indeed can they turn for help in the affray? They were in very different case when they could rely on the unswerving championship of some of the greatest minds in all human history—for example, Newton's.

For a thousand years and much more the apologetics of religious dogmatists was addressed mainly to reason. Now that reason has definitely rejected the appeal, the dogmatists impugn the competence of the court: a tergiversation perhaps humanly excusable, but nevertheless rather ludicrous.

The present situation is that the intelligentsia has sat back, shrugged its shoulders, given a sigh of relief, and decreed, tacitly or by plain statement, the conclusion of the argument. "The affair is over and done with," the intelligentsia seems to announce. "There is no more to be said. Let us get on to something else." The intelligentsia rarely puts its nose into a church, save in quest of æsthetic or archæological emotions. It has thus deprived itself, and been compelled by intellectual honesty to deprive itself, of what was once, to use the old, beautiful, and accurately descriptive phrase, a "means of grace." And it has not found a substitute, has not troubled to cast about for a substitute. It has thrown down a god, if not three, and erected no new deity or deities in their place.

Therefore the intelligentsia, with a continually increasing number of followers, is in effect for the time being godless. The apparent negligence which characterises this state of godlessness is explicable. The age has been awakened by scientific discovery to the wonders and mysteries of physical phenomena, the study of which phenomena is absorbing and monopolises the faculties. Physical phenomena, too, while baffling, are concrete. And in their new-found marvellousness they cannot but attract more powerfully than cloudy speculations upon the ultimate beginning and the ultimate end of life.

Also the age, being scientific, is spiritually humble. The more it learns, the better it realises that knowledge is endless, packed full of miracles of whose staggering incomprehensibility previous ages had no notion. Previous ages talked easily of "the author of the universe." But the universe of previous ages was simplicity compared with the

universe of our own age. To conceive the author of the universe so awfully surrounding us is a task which would affright the most daring mystical mind. God towers above us infinitely higher than he towered above our ancestors. What mortal hand or eye shall frame his fearful symmetry?

And lastly, the chief thing that we know now is that we shall never know. The unknowable exists for us. What will be the future development of man's attitude towards the everlasting enigma we cannot even surmise. We await, quiescent, the next touch of the indicating finger of this stupendous God.

III

THE TRAGEDY OF IRRELIGION

WHILE regarding it as unavoidable, I regret the growing irreligion of the present age. But not for the usual religious or extra-religious reasons, which I consider to be false reasons and quite negligible.

The first of these usual reasons lies in the dogma that man's after-death destiny is determined by his pre-death religious beliefs.

The second reason lies in the old allegation of rulers and politicians that a population with a definite religious faith (that is, a conviction of the truth of religious dogma) is more easily controlled and governed than a population without such faith. It is too soon yet to test the validity of the allegation. All that can be properly said is that, so far, the admitted growth of irreligion has not been accompanied by any increase of unruliness. Our nation to-day is at least as amenable to the authority of law as ever it was. Indeed I am inclined to think that it is more amenable. Certainly misdemeanours and riots are diminishing.

The third reason lies in the allegation that religious faith is necessary to good morals. I have yet to find in history any support for this allegation. Religious propaganda, when the propagandists had power, has always been marked by desperate cruelty of one sort or another,

narrow-mindedness, injustice, and tyranny. The propagandists, even if they refrained from asserting that the root of religion was belief in dogma and not good moral conduct at all, have constantly outraged morality in their passion for the upholding of faith. In so doing they have constantly held that the end justified the means; which involves the proposition that the means needed a lot of justifying, as in fact the means did.

Further, the private lives of tens of thousands of propagandists have been notoriously disfigured by immorality both spectacular and secret. Still further, propagandists as well as their convinced adherents have notoriously denied in daily conduct the moral precepts laid down by their religion. And they still do so, on an immense scale. Protesters have again and again remarked, with truth, that if the founder of the Christian religion arrived on earth now and sought to bring about the practical moral application of, say, the Sermon on the Mount, he would see the inside of either a prison or a lunatic asylum within a month.

More, strict adherence to religious dogma, though it has undenied advantages of perhaps a high type, exerts also a deleterious influence upon the character. Thus it encourages the human tendency towards spiritual pride and self-righteousness. It subtly causes the adherent to despise the mass of his fellow-creatures. It helps to divide the race into the chosen few and the doomed multitude.

And it discourages intellectual honesty, which happens to be one of the greatest virtues. It must do so. Dogma has to be defended in its totality and at all costs. There have been many attacks on dogma which were unfair, insincere, and deliberately dishonest; and doubtless there have been many defences of dogma which were exempt from those vices. But speaking broadly the attacks have been much cleaner than the defence, in addition to being more effective.

Take the historic printed debate between T. H. Huxley, the agnostic, and W. E. Gladstone, author of *The Impreg-*

nable Rock of Holy Scripture. This debate was a landmark in the annals of Christian apologetics. Read it now—it will bear reading—and ask yourself whether the dogmatist, the earnest religionist, showed himself more honest, more scrupulously fair, more anxious in the search for truth than the agnostic. The answer is plain. He did not. As for dialectical skill, the agnostic was so obviously the better man that to compare the two would be difficult. The antagonists were both great men. One could call upon dogmatic religious faith to assist him in the moral crises of existence. The other could not. But does the record of the latter yield any sign of inferiority to the former in public and private virtue, in every sort of integrity, in sustained devotion to an ideal, in modesty, in altruism, in contempt for earthly rewards? It does not.

And, widening the issue, has the experience of the average citizen taught him to expect more virtue, more kindliness, more spiritual humility from a practising member of a Church than from an outsider? I leave the average citizen to reply; but I can guess his reply with some assurance of being correct.

My own reason for regretting the spread of irreligion is that it means the cutting-off of an ever-growing mass of people from regular communion with the infinite, or, if you prefer the word, God. That such communion suffers from disadvantages, and does not possess some of the advantages claimed for it, I am fully persuaded. But no matter what its disadvantages, and no matter how factitious certain of its alleged advantages, one supreme advantage unassailably remains: the enlargement and enrichment of inner emotional experience. Without supra-earthly and supra-temporal communion the life of the average person is narrowed down; it moves continuously within the confined circle of dailiness, from which it can get no sure relief. It is always the same. The finest faculties of the soul become atrophied. The finest pleasures are lost. Grandeur is forgotten, is even despised. The soul is never

refreshed as it can alone be refreshed by frequent contact with the sublime, with conceptions which transcend all the common conceptions of mundane existence. Life passes in a windowless and unventilated compartment.

Of course there are a fortunate few who can obtain escape from the mundane by means other than religious worship—by the vision of sunrises, sunsets, beautiful landscapes, seascapes, the reading of philosophical or pious masterpieces, private thought, even the revelations of the microscope, and especially by solitary watching of the clear firmament at night.

But these and similar means are not open to the average man. The average man lacks the mind-control necessary for strictly applied meditation. Also he does not and cannot read abstrusely; the eyes of science are beyond his use; the inspiring beauties of nature are inconveniently distant, and the nocturnal sky too rarely available for mystic employment. Moreover, the average man would fail in the volitional forces essential to the pursuance of these exercises were they otherwise possible. Still further, the average man must have some definite image with recognisable characteristics upon which to concentrate his aspirations towards the divine, and a more or less complete system of theology springing from the same. And he must be subject to a rule of fixed times and ceremonies demanding from him exact obedience and observance; he must worship not only for satisfaction but from a sense of duty.

Lastly, the average man instinctively and rightly feels the need of fellowship in worship; for without fellowship there can be, for him, no conviction of that general compelling authority which better than anything else provides the indispensable element of secureness in belief.

Authority is the beginning and the end of all theological systems. I mean human authority. Without some extraordinarily powerful individual authority a theological system cannot begin. Nor can it grow unless the authority

grows. When the authority wanes, the system wanes. And when the authority expires, the system expires. Moral prestige is its sole immediate source of vitality ; for, though divine authority is predicated, it can only be imposed upon the multitude through some force of human prestige.

The authority which holds up, or held up, Christian theology is dwindling, dying, vanishing away. The average man is probably not familiar with the steps of the process of decline. He feels rather than knows that the process is now steadily and ruthlessly going forward. He has fragmentary news of it in the papers and more complete news of it in books. The hierarchs in pulpits try to reassure him, but instead of reassuring him they deepen his disquietude by their rearguard dialectics and by their positive surrender of bits of ground here and there.

And for him the most effective evidence of decline is the gradual emptying of churches, accompanied by an expanding disesteem for the hierarchs thereof. Why are so many people staying outside ? Is there not a prospect of his being left all alone in the church ? . . . Human nature is weak, and it is imitative ; it fears solitude. His attendances become irregular. They cease. And with their ceasing ceases access to any practicable " means of grace." His life deteriorates spiritually. He forgets that he ever had a spiritual life. His children have never had a spiritual life and are almost entirely unacquainted with the emotions which the phrase connotes. There resides the tragedy of the situation, unperceived by all but a few.

IV

IS THE CHURCH BLAMEWORTHY ?

THE Church (I mean all the Churches except the Roman Catholic, which with both worldly and unworldly wisdom confines itself to assertion and refuses argument)—the Church has come in for a great deal of blame for the present situation. Its adherents are divided. Some charge it

with yielding too much ; others charge it with not yielding enough. Its opponents have the air of condemning it because it does not make a total surrender to the forces marshalled against it.

I cannot see why the Church should be blamed. No doubt there is a certain quaintness in the fact that at this date some communicants of the Church should still be rudely and violently quarrelling as to whether the physical material of the sacrament is or is not transformed into the actual body of Jesus at or before the moment of ingurgitation. But in all institutions it is of course the extremists who produce the most noise. An institution, however, should be judged by its average individuals ; and, this being so, I consider, as a member of the non-Church party, that the Church is not worthy of blame. The Church, caught in a cruel situation, and not in the least through its own fault, deserves, rather, sympathy and pity.

What could the Church have done ?

It is by its very nature a conservative organism. It deals with the eternal, the changeless, the fixed. Its growth has been slow. It has had little voluntary commerce with human reason and none with science. It is based on authority and on nothing else. It has appealed to reason, but never as a substitute for authority—only as a support for authority. It could not have foreseen the advance of science, and even had it foreseen, could not have taken effective measures to protect itself. It was unprepared, and was bound to be unprepared. It was helpless, and still is. As an organism it is a victim of evolution, whose passage is continually marked by the fall of organisms and the rise of other organisms. Its situation is worse than cruel ; it is impossible. In the past the finest brains were actively at its service. To-day the finest brains are either arrayed against it or keep an attitude of indifference. In the past it had vast riches. To-day it is too poor to pay a decent wage to thousands of its priests. Inevitably its social prestige wanes with its authority and its wealth.

The Church has acted as other organisms threatened by evolution have always acted and always will act. None of the anti-clericals—who have the purely chronological luck to be marching *with* the cause of evolution—can honestly say to the Church: “In your place I would have acted differently.” The Church has followed the sole practicable policy—it has fought for every foot of its territory. It has abandoned nothing that it was not by the superior force of reason utterly compelled to abandon. Indeed many leaders of the Church have shown an astounding moral courage in admitting defeat and retiring from territory.

When the successors of the present favourites of evolution at length discover themselves, as they will, to be in conflict with that resistless onward-pushing power, they will behave precisely as the Church is now behaving. They will temporise, they will twist words, they will prevaricate, they will commit every sort of intellectual dishonesty. Because it is human to do these things and because they have no alternative. And the result will be the same. There is no attainable absolute truth. But there are attainable relative truths, which follow and subvert one another; and probably the subverting truth is nearer than its forerunner to the unattainable absolute. In any case the subverting truth is sure to conquer—until its turn comes to be conquered. This procession of relative truths constitutes the evolution of knowledge and reason. It involves martyrdoms.

Even men of science will fight desperately and disingenuously for causes which the unprejudiced observer knows to be lost causes, though science is hampered by no responsibility extraneous to itself. The Church has, or has had, immense social and political responsibilities. Even were the Church convinced (which it is not yet) of the fact that its authority is founded on relative truth now damaged beyond repair, it could not suddenly proclaim its conviction. To do so would be to throw whole nations into revolutionary turmoil; it would be a crime against society, a

calamitous failure to allow for the limitations of human nature. If truth is relative, so are lies. Without a quite large amount of relative lying, civilised society could not endure. The time for the total abolition of temporarily convenient sophistry is not ripe, and never will be ripe.

V

NEED OF A NEW RELIGION

A NEW channel of communication with the infinite and the everlasting is clearly the need of the age: that is to say, a new religion. The conception of God, the first creative cause, remains, and will remain; for nothing has happened in the history of the growth of the human mind to render the existence of a first cause unnecessary in any religious system of thought. God, for ever unknowable in a scientific sense, survives unaltered in His own essence. But human conceptions of God are made and discarded one after another. It may be asserted, roughly, that each conception is less crude than its predecessor. Impossible of course for a believer in any creed to admit that the conception of God defined by his creed is not the final conception! Yet it must be obvious to the ideal scientific detached thinker that no conception of God is or ever can be final.

As regards the Christian creed, nearly every dogma which has clustered about the core of transcendental belief will be shed away: many of the attributes of God, the Fall, the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Birth, the divinity of Jesus, the Redemption, the divine inspiration of the Bible or parts of it, the existence of the Holy Ghost, the nature of the soul, the ultimate fate of souls. None of these ingenious and once effective inventions can survive intact the ordeal of strict rational examination. Reason, educated by scientific research, has outgrown them. Already the van of thought has abandoned them all, and sooner or later—sooner perhaps than later—they will all be abandoned by the mass of civilised mankind.

We are at the beginning of one of the interregnums which come between the ages of the dominion of religious faith. We are cut off, not wholly, but in very serious part, from the infinite. We suffer loss. Our loss is the price which at intervals has to be paid for progress.

We cannot call upon the official Church for a new religion. To do so would be to call upon it to stultify itself, even to render itself ridiculous. The rôle of the Church is not to innovate; its rôle is to conserve. The Church is bound to lag behind public opinion. It makes mistakes, but it will not and cannot make the mistake which ruined, for instance, the stability of the Greek communities, of trying to keep law continually abreast of public opinion. Moreover, the Church is totally unfitted for such a creative task. And the genesis of a new religion is never the fruit of a deliberate act. It originates in some movement of the instinct, mysterious, uncomprehended at the moment by its apostles, who can neither explain philosophically its source nor foresee its results. The new religion does not appear just when the necessity for it is realised. And it does not seem new until it is old. Its early converts are honestly persuaded that it is a restatement of ancient truth cleansed by the washing away of accumulated error. And this to some extent it may be.

Whence, from whom, in what form, will the next religion arrive? We cannot even surmise. We can only wait for it, quiescent. Any positive activity towards it would be grotesquely futile.

Three probabilities may, however, be cautiously suggested concerning it. The first is that on its appearance it will not be identified. More, its identity as the new religion will be violently denied. It will be laughed at, scorned. Its propagandists will be subjected to various ignominies. The adherents of nascent religions, like those of moribund religions, are destined to be martyrs.

The second probability is that it will incorporate itself in some of the forms of the religion which it is to supplant.

This phenomenon may be deemed to be an expedient of nature rather than a conscious device of the propagandists, to the end of maintaining a semblance of continuity in order to reassure the timid and the conventional.

The third probability is that it will be based on such a creed as a majority of the best minds can sincerely subscribe to. If it does not within a reasonable time engage the support of the best minds of its epoch it will inevitably die young, after a wild struggle to outlive the perils of infancy.

Eagerly curious brains will speculate upon its content, and some prophetic guesses at it may be fortunate. But the wise will prepare for the event less by speculation than by striving to rid themselves of the prejudices which impair judgment.

VI

THE CONFLICT

TROUBLE lies ahead. And it will be intensified by bad manners on one or both sides of the great altercation. Strange, also deplorable, that theological controversy should nearly always be accompanied by gestures which would never be permitted in the prize-ring or on the football field ! If anybody ventures to say that a particular variety of a particular religious doctrine is not absolutely perfect, the critic is sure to be charged with disgraceful conduct, with evil motives, and with an inexcusable arrogance. All religious history bears out this statement. And I know it by personal experience. On the rare occasions when I have meddled with doctrinal questions, my fate has been to be vilified in terms which the crudest orator in Hyde Park could not easily surpass. I remember that after affirming the existence of an entity which it is convenient to describe as God, I was accused by numbers of professing Christians, who no doubt were at a momentary loss for picturesque abuse, of patronising the Deity. I anticipate with certain assurance that my prediction of the fall of the Christian religion as we know it will arouse the worst

instincts in the tumultuous breast of the fanatic, that I shall be told that I don't know what I am talking about, that I shall further be told that I am an ignoble and despicable creature quite unworthy of notice, and that I shall be asked : " Who are *you*, after all ? " The answer to the question is that I am an average honest fellow who is interested in religion and in the spiritual life of peoples.

I have referred to fanatics. All of us, except fanatics, are aware that fanatics are obstreperously narrow-minded. But fanatics are by no means the only offenders in this matter. In the recent and hardly yet closed controversy concerning the Prayer Book of the Established Church, leaders of the Church not without some reputation for breadth of view attacked one another with foul epithets of execration that thieves and thugs might justifiably resent. Indeed, the abuse exchanged between differing followers of Christ is more violent than even the abuse directed by Christians against the declared and outright opponents of all Christian dogma.

It has been argued that the violence of the Prayer Book controversy is a proof of the genuine vitality of Christianity in our island. I doubt it. I should rather say that the great majority of the citizens were merely pained lookers-on at the noisy rumpus, and that the utter negation of Christian brotherly love which characterised the rumpus was proof enough that the basic principles of practical Christianity had no hold on the defenders thereof. The historic phrase " odium theologicum " describes a terrible phenomenon. And no Christian so far as I know has succeeded in satisfactorily explaining why the champions of the Christian faith consider themselves entitled, when challenged by friend or enemy, to indulge in slander, libel, gross breaches of the common polite usages of debate, and every expression of contempt and hatred.

Even if the assailants of Christianity had set them the example of vulgar violence, that fact would not warrant them in copying an example so completely contrary to the admonitions of their Founder. But the example was not

set by the opposing agnostics, who, naturally intimidated at first by a vast body of public opinion, were compelled to walk delicately and to use every precaution of careful and moderate statement. The example originated in the Christian camp, which, secure in numbers and prestige, so far forgot itself as to resort to bullying bluster of the most regrettable coarseness. True, the agnostics, getting stronger, have since frequently replied in kind ; but they had been provoked thereto, and moreover, the Christians are surely not supposed to take their code of behaviour from those whom they despise and condemn.

And even if Christians are convinced that faith alone (without works) is the unique key to future salvation ; even if they believe (as many do) that an act of faith on a deathbed will more than counterbalance a lifetime of iniquity ; even if they believe (as many apparently do) that a baby who dies unbaptised is doomed to eternal damnation—even so, invective, unmeasured and unseemly vituperation, constitute the stupidest possible policy for propagandists of any religious faith. They deprive the faith of dignity. They fatally harm the cause which they are intended to protect and to advance. No faith can be helped by indulgence in primeval instincts or by outrages upon recognised ideals of human decency. Nor is the depth of the sincerity of faith to be gauged by the turbulence of the faithful—except in inverse ratio. The man who is surest of his own faith is the man who most temperately advocates it. Nothing so much as the indecorum of Christian protagonists and their crudely expressed hatreds has contributed to the creation of an atmosphere favourable to the success of those forces which are bringing about the collapse of Christianity.

VII

VALUE OF ETHICS

THE foregoing brief excursions into certain un-Christian characteristics of Christian polemics bring me to the

consideration of the constructive opportunities offered by the present crisis. In the active manifestations of the religious spirit "faith" has generally, if not always, occupied a more important place than "works." Far more than works, faith has been the cause of virulent argument, hatred, self-conceit, slander, libel, bloodshed, physical and moral cruelty, homicide, and war. And in modern times the opposing cohorts have never been marshalled for the fighting-out of any question concerning works. In no public meeting do disputants assail one another with abusive objurgations on points of earthly ethics. Dogma alone has aroused evil and squalid passions. If one-hundredth part of the energy expended upon the propagation of solutions of problems which are incapable of solution had been given to the propagation of ideals of conduct plainly advocated by the Founder of Christianity, the Christian world would to-day be an infinitely less repulsive spectacle than it in truth is.

Preachers have of course preached their ideals of conduct, but they have never attached to them any save a secondary importance in religious life ; and that they have preached them without brilliant success is proved by the fact that in moments of critical strain the faithful, led by their preachers, have invariably abandoned them. When self-interest has been involved, the preachers, descending from the Mount, have denied the author of the Sermon on the Mount and inculcated behaviour directly contrary to his behests. Then and only then have their exhortations effectively succeeded. This is a matter of history, mediæval and modern.

At this present, religion is probably exercising less influence in favour of the right conduct of life than at any previous period in all the annals of Christianity. Even when the Christian oligarchy was setting the very worst example of private manners to its flocks, when the government of the Church was corrupt, venal, and licentious, it still had prestige and authority. It could effectively preach what it did not practise ; and it could and did control by

means of threats which were accepted at their face-value.

But to-day the Church, having already lost much of its prestige and more of its authority, is losing what remains of both at a steadily increasing rate. Its example is much better than of old in some departments of conduct, not a whit better in some others. Venality and corruption have almost disappeared ; open licence has entirely disappeared ; but goodwill shows no improvement, and violent mutual hostility flourishes. The Church's efforts to promote spirituality are nullified by public exhibitions of controversy from which nearly all trace of spirituality has vanished. Interest is centred upon matters of doctrinal detail. The answers to the everlasting and universal question, " What must I do to be saved ? " are obscure and contradictory. Therefore the relationship between the character of earthly life and the nature of ultimate human destiny has become obscure to the point of being destroyed. And meanwhile ethics are ignored. So that morals and religion are equally suffering, and from the same cause. The Church, as I have already said, cannot be blamed. The Church is in a mess not of its making. The Church is in defeat. It is bound to try to save itself ; but it cannot save itself. It is victimised by the irresistible march of evolution.

But if the Church in its preoccupations about self-preservation (which depends on the preservation of its dogma) cannot keep due watch upon ethics, that fact need not and should not mean that ethics must be systematically neglected. The Church being a dwindling body, it follows that the non-Church body, the body which is exempt from the anxieties of the Church, is multiplying, growing in numbers and in strength. The non-Church body cannot help the Church, has no desire to help the Church. It has no living interest in any surviving dogmas. But herein is no reason why it should not have a living interest in ethics. The demise of a particular dogma or group of dogmas does

not connote the demise of ethics as the basis of an ordered rule of life. There are vast numbers of persons outside the Church who believe in the social value of ethics and who would welcome the renaissance of a curiosity about ethics with the practical aim of establishing a code subsisting, not on the authority of dogma, but on its own inherent authority as a demonstrably efficient means to the best kind of happiness.

I will enumerate a few of the categories into which such persons fall :—

Those who, having no belief at all in a future life, still desire to maintain dignity and achieve rectitude in this life for the sake of this life and with no hope of reward other than the reward of living harmoniously with conscience.

Those who, apart from a religious creed, hold the dogma that individual existence is eternal and who believe that right conduct in this life will have an advantageous effect upon future life.

Those who, of a scientific habit of thought, believe that every act has an everlasting consequence and that therefore, though individual continuity of existence can be neither affirmed nor denied, right conduct in this life will have an advantageous effect upon the future of the atoms which, if dispersed at death, come together again after death in new, undiscoverable, and unimagined vital organisms.

Those who, while regarding Jesus as a man like themselves, yet venerate him as the greatest of all moral teachers.

Those who, with a dominating social sense, feel the desire to reform and elevate society by substituting finer ideals for the current ideals which, falsely in their opinion, assume that money, luxury, idleness, self-indulgence, and self-interest will subserve the commonweal.

To these I would add the large numbers of convinced Christian churchmen whose passion for faith does not monopolise their cerebral activities to the extent of rendering them insensible to the importance of ethics in religious systems.

VIII

THE PRESTIGE OF JESUS

WHATEVER may have happened to his prestige as a divinity, the moral prestige of Jesus has maintained itself intact, and especially among Protestant peoples. Agnostics and others have sought to prove their derring-do by writing God with a small "g." The moral characteristics of God, as presented in the Bible, have been criticised with a force, a freedom, and an effectiveness which have resulted in considerable permanent damage to his repute. But probably, almost certainly, no figure in history sacred or profane has been less attacked than that of Jesus. And this in spite of the fact that his teachings have been regularly ignored by the majority of his followers for many centuries; and in spite of the fact that in large numbers of the best minds his godhead has been reduced to a myth no more credible than a dozen other myths of a similar sort.

To say the least, he remains to-day the greatest individuality in the annals of mankind. His story still silences the voice of the detractor. He is still loved by men as much as he is esteemed. And there is no sign of change in the human attitude towards him.

The one complaint against his ethics has been that they are a counsel of perfection, beyond the compass of infirm human nature, and therefore that they cannot be successfully put into practice by the average man in average circumstances. This may or may not be true. We cannot yet tell; for the reason that the ethics of Jesus have never had a proper trial on a scale sufficiently large for a period sufficiently long to enable us to judge their practicableness. Peter denied Christ thrice, but the average man and the average Christian has denied him thrice ten thousand times. Nevertheless Jesus has had more than lip-service. He has had the service of the heart, though the heart was faint. The anomaly is strange.

Assuming that a serious attempt were now to be made to

raise ethics into a paramount prominence which the Church has always refused them, upon what surer foundation could they be based than the individuality of Jesus, with the support of his unique authority throughout the Occidental world? His system of morals exists; it is universally familiar; it appeals; it is beautiful in form and substance. It has immeasurable advantages over any system that could be invented and compiled *ad hoc* by any self-appointed body of men however eminent, wise, and idealistic, to meet a felt need and to initiate a new crusade.

There are those who deny that Jesus ever lived. If they are correct, the adequate reply is that the legend of him is the most marvellous and triumphant example of convincing creative art in the world's literature, and that it does not very much matter whether he lived or not. There have been, and are, more numerous critics who, while admitting the historicity of Jesus, subject the Gospels to a minute textual scrutiny in which points of Greek style, points of translation, points of internal and of external evidence, points of probability and improbability, possibility and impossibility, points of coherence, of homogeneity and contradiction, are assembled together in such ever-growing subtlety and profusion that the average good brain is dazed thereby into a state resembling repudiation of the whole report. Certainly this scrutiny has its usefulness, but only if it is not allowed to obscure the grand essential fact that the corpus of Christ's ethical teaching, broadly comprehensible, does exist before our eyes.

The origin, even the authorship, of the teaching is not the main factor. The main factor is that the teaching is there, persuasive by its own inherent value. Were it translated from the Chinese instead of from a particular variety of Greek, were it not translated at all but written originally in Elizabethan English, its inherent value and appeal would be the same. Had Jesus never lived or never been invented, the inherent value and appeal of the teaching would be the same. Its intrinsic qualities give it an

intrinsic prestige, and its intrinsic prestige is worthy of its tremendous external prestige. Without the former the latter would not have sufficed to preserve its power over the human conscience and imagination ; for various writings which have begun their vogue with equal external prestige, the prestige of the divine, have sunk to the level of museum curiosities, solely because their intrinsic prestige has failed to pass the test of time. The sermons and sayings of Jesus are one of those parts of the Bible whose general acceptance depends on no confirmation by historical or scientific research. The teaching cannot be impugned by scholars or scientists or philosophers.

It can be impugned in the consciences of men alone. And in the consciences of men it never has been impugned. Nor is it likely to be, at any rate until the arrival of some measurelessly distant epoch when the constitution and relations of men shall have changed in a direction at present inconceivable to us.

IX

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

I HAVE not the space, and certainly I have not the exegetical competence, to discuss the whole body of the moral teaching of Jesus. But I can say briefly how it presents itself to a man irreligious (in the doctrinal sense of the term) and instinctively opposed to all dogma. In my view, the kernel of the teaching is in what are called the Beatitudes, and the most important of the Beatitudes is : " Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness : for they shall be filled." The desire for well-doing is the beginning of well-doing. And desire, any desire, can be cultivated by thinking upon it. Without the desire to achieve, little or nothing can be achieved.

In London you cannot walk far or ride long in omnibuses before your eye meets quotations from the Bible displayed by religious societies or individuals. The latter usually

chalk their admonitions on pavements or walls. Thus you read : " Prepare to meet thy God." To which the natural reaction of ninety-five per cent. of the beholders is : " What God ? Have I a God ? Where and how shall I meet Him ? Shall I ever meet Him ? " The exhortation is bound up with dogma which very few people can accept ; it therefore fails to excite the practical interest wished for by the propagandists.

Or you read : " Christ died to save sinners." To which the natural reaction is : " But did he ? That is the question, and these guides to salvation are merely begging it." The exhortation fails for the same reason as the first one. It can appeal only to minds already convinced of the truth of the dogma implied.

I cannot recall ever having seen advertised the words : " Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." Yet here is no religious dogma to offend or to chill. Here for every conscience is a reminder to which no dialectical or emotional exception can be taken, an appeal likely to arouse some response from the dormant or semi-dormant motive power that actuates right living.

Next in importance to that Beatitude I should put, not another Beatitude, but a later passage from the Sermon : " All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." No religious dogma here either ! But an injunction, independent of religious dogma, which must be persuasive to all temperaments, and which should invigorate the very root of the individual instinct for justice and goodwill. The impulse of civilised nations is to-day towards the abolition of war as being the greatest world-evil. But no nation whose citizens do not foster in themselves, in the conduct of their private affairs, the ideals of justice and goodwill can possibly hope to work effectively for the abolition of war. The same is to be said of class-war. To practise individual injustice and ill-will is to make inevitable the triumphs of national and inter-class injustice and ill-will. Righteousness begins at home. If

it has not begun at home, it cannot prosper in the chancelleries, or in the conference-rooms of capital and labour.

The counsel to my mind third in importance is : " Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Some of the teachings of Jesus are touched with a poetical emphasis, an exaggeration of metaphor and simile, which of course must be allowed for in their transposition to the literal. But how apt they are to the defects of the present epoch, which admittedly sins by luxury and self-indulgence and arrogance ! Even if—most improbably—we carried to excess an obedience to the behest : " Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink ; nor yet for your body what ye shall put on. . . . But seek ye first righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you,"—what an amelioration of social and private life would be the result ! And against arrogance : " Love your enemies . . . do good to them that hate you. . . . For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye ? . . . And, if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others?"

It has been held, of this and other related teaching, that to follow it too strictly would involve the ascendancy of the unscrupulous bully and the perpetuation of the menace of war. Well, there is no fear of us following it too strictly. The fear is that we should not follow it strictly enough. And if by miracle we did, the main consequence would be such peace of mind, such tranquillity of conscience and absorption in the secret satisfaction of the spirit, as no bullies and no big guns could disturb. Moreover, instances abound in which strict adherence to the dictates of the teaching has been richly accompanied by what we describe as " worldly success."

It is written at the close of the Sermon, which perhaps lasted several days : " And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine." The people are still astonished at his doctrine, so astonished that to this day not one in a hundred thousand of the people cares to put it to the trial. If any

considerable proportion of the people did put it to the trial, the felicity of the sequel might astonish them even more than the doctrine itself. The teachings of Jesus have probably a wonderful future, unless in the obstinacy of our cowardice we continue to refuse them.

X

A CAMPAIGN

It is a strange thing: the advocacy of Jesus' code of conduct makes me rather uncomfortable and self-conscious, despite my conviction of its efficaciousness and its suitability for the needs of to-day, and despite the still unrivalled authority of its author. Which shows the width of the separation between his conception of the means to happiness and ours.

And yet why should I be troubled? It is certain that so far as the principles of the Sermon on the Mount have been acted upon they have been successful: a thousand biographies and autobiographies prove this. It is equally certain that the principles which govern us to-day have not succeeded, though they have been practised with an extreme thoroughness. The broad result of their rule is indeed deplorable.

Critics may say that, being simply moral, the principles of the Sermon offer no method for attaining new spiritual contact with the infinite. True! But a new spiritual contact with the infinite cannot be attained by taking thought. That is a task for genius, which is incalculable and whose advent is unforeseeable. Every founder of a new religion has had genius, and every new religion has first appeared as a magnificent and startling surprise. We can do nothing by deliberate act towards the discovery of a new religion which will satisfy the demands of reason.

On the other hand, ethics can be established and popularised by taking thought and by hard, sustained work. When a system of morals which has rarely if ever been

questioned lies waiting to hand, and when ethics alone provide an outlet for the instinct to do something positive for the betterment of the human race, shall serious people neglect the intensive propagation of ethics and remain quiescent in a field which cries out for activity? Shall the practice of the Christian ethic be left exclusively to Boy Scouts, who at any rate bind themselves to show, by some unselfish deed, goodwill to a fellow-creature at least once a day? The answer seems not to be doubtful.

Any campaign for the spread of Christ's ethics must first be organised in the hearts of a few profoundly convinced individuals. It must be practised long before it can be preached in a manner to bring conviction to hearers. It must not partake of the nature of a stunt. The co-operation of certain newspapers would kill it, though the co-operation of certain others might help it. Churches cannot be used; to use them would equally kill it.

Nor can professed Christians share in it, unless they would engage themselves to refrain from the propaganda of religious dogma—and could they so engage themselves? Doubtful! However, I would let them try.

The crusade must be in charge of persons of strong moral faith but agnostic as to religious faith. Books would assist, if they were cheap, honest, moderate in tone, and readable. Withal, the aid of orators would be as necessary as the aid of organisers. From time to time I have heard effective oratory in Hyde Park. But I have never listened to an orator who did not give at least half of his oration to the business of vilifying those who disagreed with his views. Blame, ill-will, self-righteousness, conscious superiority of soul would be fatal. The astonishing novelty of oratory free from these defects would in itself attach and impress. If the campaign which I visualise were initiated, and if it succeeded, it would do more than anything else possibly could to create an unworldly atmosphere propitious to the birth of a new religion and the indication of a new avenue of spiritual communication with the infinite eternal.

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